

About *Momentum*

In this chapter, Sun Tzu addresses what happens when we come into direct competition with our opponents. We want to define positions that make direct competition unlikely and undesirable. We want positions where our competition doesn't want to face us directly, but, unfortunately, we can't always find such dominant positions. When we can't, we find ourselves in a competitive "battle." Battles include sales situations, market contests, and races to get products to market where no competitor has a clear edge.

In the Knowing, Vision, Action, Position model, Sun Tzu defines "Battle" as Action that directly opposes the Action of a competitor. He completely distrusts this approach alone as a source of success. He thinks that the idea that we can win Battle simply by out-fighting our opponents is foolish. In his competitive world, such competition doesn't take place unless both sides are so closely matched that they both think that they can win. Unless one side is sadly misinformed, the situation is one in which equal forces are probably contesting for the same prize.

So we never use Battle alone. We use it with another form of Attack, Surprise. By Surprise, Sun Tzu doesn't mean Deception, an Attack on Vision, but something more familiar to business people. His concept of Surprise is very close to what we call Innovation, the use of creative new methods. Surprise is not an attack on Vision but on Knowledge. It outmodes existing thinking and fundamentally changes the contest.

Lesson 67

When can you use direct action against an opponent?

- A. You never use direct action against an opponent.**
- B. You only use direct action in smaller conflicts.**
- C. You only use direct action in large conflicts.**
- D. You only use direct action when you have planned a surprise.**

You control a large army the same as you control a few men.

You just divide their ranks correctly.

You fight a large army the same as you fight a small one.

You only need the right position and communication.

You may meet a large enemy army.

You must be able to encounter the enemy without being defeated.

You must correctly use both surprise and direct action.

Your army's position must increase your strength.

Troops flanking an enemy can smash them like eggs.

You must correctly use both strength and weakness.

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- D. You only use direct action when you have planned a surprise.

Many people think that the rules change as the scale of competition changes, but the rules don't change. In modern parlance, the rules of competition are scalable. What works for small, local competitions also works for large, international ones. The larger the effort, the more organization and communication it requires, but the rules are the same.

In Sun Tzu's system, forces of different size naturally avoid direct conflict because smaller forces can escape larger ones. Direct conflict between equal forces is also usually avoided because the outcome of conflict is uncertain. We look for situations where opponents miscalculate the weight of force that we can put into a contest. This is where surprise becomes important. Surprise can mean that we successfully deceive the opponent about our true size, but Sun Tzu more often means that we use innovation, a new approach to battle for which the opposition is unprepared. Deception is an attack on Vision, but Surprise is an attack on Knowledge, outmoding the leader's knowledge of methods rather than the leader's understanding of the situation.

Lesson 68

When do you use surprise in a direct confrontation?

- A. You use it immediately to put the opponent off balance.
- B. You use it to choose the timing to start the attack.
- C. You use it in the middle of the attack to turn the tide of battle.
- D. You use it continuously throughout the attack.

It is the same in all battles.

You use a direct approach to engage the enemy.

You use surprise to win.

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- C. You use it in the middle of the attack to turn the tide of battle.

When most people read *surprise* in this context, they naturally think surprise attack. This is clearly *not* what Sun Tzu was teaching. His word *surprise* is better translated as *extraordinary* or *unusual*. In the original Chinese, it clearly applies to our methods. This surprise is closer in meaning to what we call *innovation*.

Why is it important for the battle to start conventionally? Our opponents must misunderstand the basis of battle. We want them thinking that we will be using infantry when we are really planning to unleash our cavalry. If they know that we plan an innovation, they will be cautious, looking to counter it. If they see that we are using traditional approaches, they will compete in traditional ways. This sets them up.

We need to set them up because innovations don't work that well when they are first introduced. The first firearms weren't that much better than swords. They were slow to load and blew up frequently, killing their users. True innovations are easily countered because of these initial weaknesses. Unleashing them in the middle of battle, however, changes the nature of the confrontation. We are prepared for this change, but our competition is not. This creates confusion, uncertainty, and fear in our opponents. These are the real killers in competition. With good standard practices, even weak innovations can turn the tide.

Lesson 69

What is the real source of innovation?

- A. Your leader.
- B. Your environment.
- C. Your opposition.
- D. Your philosophy.

*You must use surprise for a successful invasion.
Surprise is as infinite as the weather and land.
Surprise is as inexhaustible as the flow of a river.*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- B. Your environment.

In Sun Tzu's model for competitive systems, the environment—weather and ground, time and place—offer infinite possibilities. Each position that we take gives us an infinite number of paths to success. Moving to take over an opponent's position—an "invasion"—requires seeing the possibilities for innovation in that place and time.

One of Sun Tzu's common themes is that to be successful we must use the "philosophy of an invader," that is, we must go after new territory. We must discover the undiscovered riches in new areas. But, uniquely for his time, Sun Tzu didn't see acquiring new territory as a zero sum game. He saw the ground as infinite. War isn't simply a matter of taking what someone else has. We must uncover new possibilities.

The limitless possibilities of "the ground" are easier to see in our time than in his. Clearly, we live in an age of discovery where people are constantly inventing new territories to conquer. The Internet is just the latest of these. Sun Tzu saw invention as the best use of creativity.

Creativity comes from developing unique points in time in a universe of infinite possibility. Our environment offers limitless potential. Change is also infinite. The universal source of change is never emptied. This is why Sun Tzu uses the "river" as his analogy for change in general.

Lesson 70

How did Sun Tzu describe the creative road to success?

- A. Creativity requires time and overcoming failure.**
- B. Creativity requires secretiveness and investment.**
- C. Creativity requires attention to details.**
- D. Creativity requires a special type of character.**

*You can be stopped and yet recover the initiative.
You must use your days and months correctly.*

*If you are defeated, you can recover.
You must use the four seasons correctly.*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- A. Creativity requires time and overcoming failure.

Notice how quickly in the discussion of creativity that Sun Tzu addresses the issue of failure. He first says that many ideas will take time to be successful. He then says that sometimes we will fail completely, but that we can recover from these failures.

Sun Tzu teaches a form of innovation that is closely tied to trial and error. In earlier chapters, he discussed keeping our attacks small and affordable. In his discussion of surprise, he makes it clear that we should not be dissuaded by the possibility or even likelihood of failure. Few ideas are instantly successful. Fewer still come to fruition without being built on a foundation of earlier failures.

Sun Tzu saw time as the key ingredient in invention. If our initial innovative idea doesn't work, we must use time, the days and months, and the four seasons, to improve upon it. Sun Tzu uses "days and months" to describe effort on our part, while "the four seasons" means simply the passage of time, especially the change of seasons. Some ideas simply require time or a change of fashion to catch on. Others require time to perfect them. Some ideas simply fail, but we can still use them as stepping stones to better ideas that have better chances for success.

Lesson 71

What is the starting point of creativity?

- A. Inspiration.**
- B. Knowledge.**
- C. Action.**
- D. Position.**

*There are only a few notes in the scale.
Yet, you can always rearrange them.
You can never hear every song of victory.*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- B. Knowledge.

To understand Sun Tzu, we must know a lot about the subtlety with which he uses words. The verse above is the first of three similar verses that seem, at first, largely poetic, but nothing in *The Art of War* is written lightly. In this first verse, Sun Tzu demonstrates his own creativity by incorporating his metaphor for knowledge—hearing—to make it clear that our knowledge is the starting point for creativity.

Knowledge starts with a set of known facts, but ability comes from knowing which facts are useful and how to arrange them. Though music is a creative art, all music is based upon the same limited set of notes. These notes are completely knowable. We can know and name every one. However, despite knowing all the notes, we don't have music until we put them together. The music is the way we put the notes together.

For Sun Tzu, the way we put facts together provides our basic knowledge. People can know the same facts but not put them together the same way. Creativity is our ability to put facts together in a new way that *works*, that is, find a more useful way to arrange them. Simply by rearranging known facts, we can create something completely new. However, before we can do any rearranging, we must have the facts to rearrange, that is, we must know something true about the world.

Lesson 72

What is the next step in the creative process?

- A. Inspiration.**
- B. Genius.**
- C. Effort.**
- D. Complexity.**

There are only a few basic colors.

Yet, you can always mix them.

You can never see all the shades of victory.

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- A. Inspiration.

Sun Tzu consistently uses sight as an analogy for inspiration or *vision*. In his second verse about creativity, he moves from hearing, that is, knowledge, to sight, that is, vision. His concept of “vision” isn’t very different from our modern concept, except that we too often see it requiring some type of genius. He taught that *vision*, the ability to see the future, arises directly from *knowledge*. The more we know, the more possibilities we can see. This is not genius. It is just information.

Again, Sun Tzu makes the point that there is no limit to creativity. *vision*, like knowledge, is limitless. There are an infinite number of good ideas in the world, but the real secret to *vision* is our ability to foresee the ones that have the potential for success, that is, the ones that offer “the shades of victory.” Inspiration doesn’t give us the ability to see the future absolutely, but it gives us the ability to see the shades and shadows of the future.

Sun Tzu didn’t define *vision* as a rare skill. If we are knowledgeable, we see that there are only certain ways that things can work; that is, there are a few basic colors. Because we are human and our knowledge is limited, we don’t see infinite possibilities. The few creative ideas that we have can be combined in an endless kaleidoscope of invention, but if we work very narrowly, we can see what is likely to work best.

Lesson 73

What should be the focus of your creativity?

- A. Novelty.
- B. Visibility.
- C. Productivity.
- D. Uniqueness.

There are only a few flavors.

Yet, you can always blend them.

You can never taste all the flavors of victory.

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

C. Productivity.

In the final reiteration of this idea of endless creativity, Sun Tzu chooses the analogy of taste. His purpose here is to make us think about what we get out of our creativity. To be useful, creativity must produce something of value. In historical terms, this could be plunder but in modern terms, we think of it as something people want or need.

Remember, *The Art of War* is a mistranslation of Sun Tzu's title. His book isn't about "art" at all. Here, he counters the first two analogies about creativity with something more down to earth. He did not believe in making war for the sake of beauty or as a form of self-expression. As a matter of fact, he hated people who fought wars for such trivial reasons. He believed that the only justification for war was to protect and support the people, and, in a very real sense, to feed them.

Today, we see war as a destructive act. Sun Tzu viewed destruction and even conflict as the failure of war. In his time, the immediate purpose was to take away land from those who didn't value it and give it to those who did and could make it more productive. The reason his classic work translates so well into the modern era is because this is still the purpose of competition: to take resources from those who use them poorly and redistribute them to those who can generate more value from them.

Lesson 74

How does a creative idea change the battle?

- A. A new idea instantly changes the rules.
- B. A new idea demands reinvention of the methods.
- C. A new idea gradually replaces conventional thinking.
- D. A new idea gets mixed in with traditional methods.

You fight with momentum.

There are only a few types of surprises and direct actions.

Yet, you can always vary the ones you use.

There is no limit in the ways you can win.

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- D. A new idea gets mixed in with traditional methods.

Though we translate the title of this chapter as “momentum,” the Chinese character is closer to the idea of “force.” In the larger context, Sun Tzu means something like the force of progress. “Momentum” is a close approximation, but our modern idea of the inexorable force of progress and the continual advance of new ideas over old ones is an even better description. What creates the force of progress? Do new ideas mean that we must reinvent everything?

Sun Tzu says no. New ideas never work by themselves. They only work when they are combined with existing methods. As a matter of fact, new ideas must work with existing technology in order to work at all. New ideas that require the reinvention of everything never work. Gradually, over time, new ideas accumulate in a given area, seemingly creating something new, but this doesn’t happen from one idea alone and it doesn’t happen overnight. The perception of something *entirely* new created overnight--such as the Internet--is always an illusion. For example, the rules of competition were written down 2,500 years ago, but they apply to the Internet perfectly well.

The final secret in using innovation is knowing how to combine a new idea with existing methods to create value. We must balance new ideas with existing methods to be successful.

Lesson 75

What is the source of all new ideas?

- A. Commerce.**
- B. Science.**
- C. Regulation.**
- D. Tradition.**

*Surprise and direct action give birth to each other.
They proceed from each other in an endless cycle.
You can not exhaust all their possible combinations!*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- D. Tradition.

Tradition or existing technology creates the environment that supports and makes a new idea feasible. Over time, if the new idea works, it becomes standard practice. It becomes tradition. It creates a new foundation for new advancements and, together with the continual process of innovation, the momentum of progress.

Tradition also creates a type of focus (or myopia) that makes a new vision possible. For example, if every person who built chairs had different methods, different designs, and different technologies, we couldn't have any real advancement in chair building technology. Real "advances" don't exist until competition among all these different methods produces a winning method, design, and technology. Once this winning approach becomes the standard, i.e. the tradition, enhancements become possible.

Without competition, standard techniques—"direct action"—cannot arise. Without standards, new methods--surprise--is not possible. Usual and unusual give birth to each other. Without the usual, there is no unusual. Without the unusual, there is no progress and no momentum. The evolutionary nature of reality was observed and recorded by Sun Tzu long before Darwin, but to a more practical purpose. Our goal is to use this theory of evolution to create useful innovations.

Lesson 76

What force can resist the force of progress?

- A. None.
- B. Faith.
- C. Time.
- D. Courage.

Surging water flows together rapidly.

Its pressure washes away boulders.

This is momentum.

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- A. None.

Water is Sun Tzu's metaphor for change. The force of change is likened over and over again to the force of water. Small changes are like drops of water. A single drop changes nothing, but drop after drop over time changes everything.

In using momentum, we try to confront our competitors with surprise after surprise, change after change. Change creates pressure on people. Over time, people adjust to change, but they cannot resist it. If they are not given time, people cannot adjust; they can only break.

The best weapon in competition is speed. This is especially true when using innovation and creativity. The faster we can innovate, the faster we can change, the harder and harder it will be for our opponents to keep up. The constant pressure of change is irresistible over time.

People talk about the force of progress in a general sense as a tide that carries us all along. Sun Tzu saw another possibility. He saw that individuals and organizations could use the force of new idea, properly combined with existing methods, to pressure their opponents in a competitive environment.

Lesson 77

What is the most important characteristic of an innovation?

- A. Its size.**
- B. Its novelty.**
- C. Its timing.**
- D. Its direction.**

*A hawk suddenly strikes a bird.
Its contact alone kills the prey.
This is timing.*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- C. Its timing.

There are three critical issues in Sun Tzu's concept of timing.

The first issue is speed. As taught by Sun Tzu, speed is the essence of war. In progress, speed is a constant pace. We seek to hurt the opposition simply by our pace of innovation. It doesn't matter how large or novel the innovation is, it is the pace of change that gives it impact. It is the speed of the hawk that kills. Most organizations, especially larger ones, have problems dealing with a fast pace of change, especially larger ones.

The next issue is targeting. To be successful, innovation must hit the competition. A change is not innovation. Being different is not innovation. Novelty alone is not innovation. The change must "hit" the competition like the hawk hits its prey. It must give people a reason to choose our product rather than the competition. It must be meaningful in terms of what customers value. It must affect the customer's cost, quality, speed, or convenience.

Finally, the ideal innovation is one that our opponents do not see coming. Many industries are affected by change, but most of these changes are seen in advance and when they see change coming, organizations have time to adjust to them. Timing means using change to surprise or blind-side our opposition.

Lesson 78

When should you promote your innovation?

- A. Continually.
- B. When the innovations is large enough to get attention.
- C. Only when innovations make a difference.
- D. Never. You should keep them secret.

*You must fight only winning battles.
Your momentum must be overwhelming.
Your timing must be exact.*

*Your momentum is like the tension of a bent crossbow.
Your timing is like the pulling of a trigger.*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- C. Only when innovations make a difference.

Continual innovation is an internal organizational strategy. Promoting it is not necessarily the best way to advance in the competitive market. We should continuously improve our organization's processes and procedures, but we must *only* promote those improvements when such promotion will win business for us.

Continual improvement has no external impact. It isn't news. Most of it isn't interesting to customers. Small improvements seem trivial. Larger improvements may be more newsworthy, but if they don't make sales, why draw attention to them? Again, unless it makes a real difference to customers, we are wasting PR space. Keeping many improvements a secret makes sense for awhile, but if the improvements that we are making don't eventually affect our customers' decisions, they aren't really improvements at all, not matter how much we like them internally.

We should time our surprises so that we can use them to effectively change peoples' minds. We should keep gradual improvements secret, gradually building up the "tension" and power of their release. We should then promote them when they make a difference in the market, when they will change customer's minds.

Lesson 79

How can we make sure that the contest goes according to plan?

- A. By taking all contingencies into account.**
- B. By keeping our plans simple.**
- C. By keeping our plans secret.**
- D. By assuming that it won't go according to plan.**

War is very complicated and confused.

Battle is chaotic.

Nevertheless, you must not allow chaos.

War is very sloppy and messy.

Positions turn around.

Nevertheless, you must never be defeated.

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- D. By assuming that it won't go according to plan.

Competition cannot be truly planned. Competitors' opposing plans collide with results than no one planned. Those that think that they can foresee every detail are wrong. Keeping plans simple is a good idea, but this does not prevent their unexpected results. Keeping plans secret is a great idea, but it also doesn't assure their success. Too many other people also have plans which conflict directly with ours.

Instead of trying to make sure that everything happens according to plan, we must expect to be surprised. We must assume that we don't have control over everything that happens. We will succeed at some plans and lose at others. As Sun Tzu says, positions turn around. This shifting type of change is completely predictable because it is the nature of competition.

If competition is chaotic, how can we prevent chaos? If it is always messy and uncertain, how can we prevent our failure? The answer to these questions is the topic of the next lesson.

Lesson 80

If competition is chaotic, where does control come from?

- A. Control is impossible.**
- B. It comes from human nature.**
- C. It comes from discipline.**
- D. It comes from aggressiveness.**

Chaos gives birth to control.

Fear gives birth to courage.

Weakness gives birth to strength.

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- B. It comes from human nature.

Competition creates chaos, but the chaos itself creates a need for order. Human nature desires order. It seeks to make sense of confusion. The greater the chaos, the more people desire order. It is this desire for order that makes order possible even in conflict.

The same is true of courage. Uncertainty creates fear. The greater the uncertainty, the greater our fear. At some point, we need to escape from this fear. We find the courage to do so because the uncertainty of change is less frightening than the uncertainty of the moment. Any predictable outcome, even death, is preferable to constant fear.

Everyone has weaknesses. No one can perfectly predict the future. Strength comes from accepting our weaknesses and learning how to use them. We feel weak because we are small, but we learn to use our smallness by becoming more specialized. We feel weak because we are unknown, but we learn to use that obscurity as mystery. We feel weak because we are new, but we learn to use that newness as novelty. We learn to see that every possible weakness is also a potential strength.

The chaos of competition makes our success possible. Without it, our innovations would have little or no impact on the competitive battle. We must not fear chaos; embrace it.

Lesson 81

How do you plan to control the chaos of competition?

- A. You plan structure.**
- B. You plan surprises.**
- C. You plan attack.**
- D. You plan defense.**

You must control chaos.

This depends on your planning.

Your men must brave their fears.

This depends on their momentum.

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- B. You plan surprises.

Sun Tzu defines momentum as combining battle with surprise. Chaos makes people desire order, but a plan for order doesn't give us control over chaos. The way we take control of chaos is to feed into it. We can change the rules of competition through surprise, innovation. We don't know what will happen when we introduce innovation into competition, but we are better prepared for whatever happens than our opposition because we control its timing.

What is important here is our sense of control. We cannot control everything that happens in competition, but we know that we can keep the competition off-balance by changing the rules via surprise.

By planning to introduce innovations, we prepare ourselves to seize the initiative. For that critical moment, we will control the momentum of the contest. The knowledge that we plan a change gives our people courage. Our fortune in the market place will rise and fall, but by preparing surprises for the competition, we put ourselves in the driver's seat while the market adjusts to the change. When we know we can spring a surprise, we go into the contest with more confidence. We have more faith in our position and eventual success. The planned surprise makes it possible for us to be more aggressive and courageous when facing adversity.

Lesson 82

What is the source of advantage in competition?

- A. Position.
- B. Innovation.
- C. Leadership.
- D. Knowledge.

*You have strengths and weaknesses.
These come from your position.*

*You must force the enemy to move to your advantage.
Use your position.
The enemy must follow you.
Surrender a position.
The enemy must take it.
You can offer an advantage to move him.
You can use your men to move him.
You use your strength to hold him.*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- A. Position.

Though this particular lesson is about creativity and innovation, we must not forget the real goals of competition. We beat the competition through our positioning in the marketplace. The goal of innovation is to capture dominating positions.

Great positions prevent battle, that is, direct competition. If our position is strong enough, competitors will avoid us. Battle results from the failure to secure a great position. When we find ourselves in competition, innovation helps us secure a dominant position. It is this position that will make us successful, not the innovation itself.

Innovation can also take us from one dominant position to another. Innovation is a continual process. Our goal is to keep one step ahead of our competitors. We can let them have past positions that we have abandoned. It puts them at a disadvantage.

Lesson 83

How do you get the most out of people in highly competitive situations?

- A. By inspiring them.**
- B. By appealing to their self-interest.**
- C. By surprising them.**
- D. By using momentum.**

You want a successful battle.

To do this, you must seek momentum.

Do not just demand a good fight from your people.

You must pick good people and then give them momentum.

From The Art of War

Answer:

D. By using momentum.

Battle comes from not having a dominant position. We wouldn't be in the battle unless we thought we could win. Others wouldn't be competing unless they thought they could beat us. We find success in these situations by controlling the momentum of the battle. We do this by introducing timely surprises into the unavoidable confusion of battle.

In competitive situations, too many business leaders simply demand that their people try harder. They expect their people to work harder and smarter than the opposition works. In situations where competitors are equally matched, it often seems that success goes to the competitors whose people put in a better effort. But simply exhorting our people to try harder is never enough. After all, our competition is also exhorting their people to work harder.

We can control the outcome if we plan to use innovation, that is, meaningful surprises in battle. Our ability to introduce creative solutions gives our people a sense of power and control. It is this confidence that gets the best work out of them. People put more effort into a winning plan. We get the best effort out of people by giving them the confidence that we will win an equal confrontation.

Lesson 84

In high-pressure situations, how do you get people to follow your directions?

- A. By asking them to do what is natural.**
- B. By making your directions simple.**
- C. By using the proper incentives.**
- D. By using the proper punishments.**

You must create momentum.

You create it with your men during battle.

This is comparable to rolling trees and stones.

Trees and stones roll because of their shape and weight.

Offer men safety and they will stay calm.

Endanger them and they will act.

Give them a place and they will hold.

Round them up and they will march.

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- A. By asking them to do what is natural.

In most situations, we want to make our directions simple, giving people incentives to do what is needed, but in battle we must do more. We must use our people's natural tendencies. Their natural tendency is to follow the path of least resistance. In high-pressure situations, the path of least resistance is defined by the direction of momentum.

If we want people to stay calm, we prepare surprises to blunt competitive attacks. This increases people's sense of security and keeps them from getting nervous.

If we need people to move, we must use innovation to create a sense of danger and risk. We put ourselves in a position where we must capture a new position in order to survive. We use innovation to put our people in situations where they must act to make these innovations work.

A big part of giving people a sense of momentum is making their situation clear so that they must all act together.

Lesson 85

If you must take combat an opponent's action with an action of your own, how do you ensure success?

- A. Use proven techniques.**
- B. Use surprise.**
- C. Use deception.**
- D. Use momentum.**

*You make your men powerful in battle with momentum.
This is just like rolling round stones down over a high, steep
cliff.
Use your momentum.*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

D. Use momentum.

Remember, momentum is created by starting with standard, proven techniques and then surprising the competition with an innovation to change the battle. The best practices, good decisions, and even deception have a way of evening out in competitive situations. Conflicting claims among competitors creates a chaos and confusion in the minds of customers.

To cut through the confusion of battle, we need a surprise that forces everyone to reaccess their methods. Innovations that have been honed over a period of time are unleashed when they will make a difference in the outcome of a critical contest.

By changing the focus of the battle, we seize control of the situation. This control gives our people more certainty and confidence. It makes them both more calm and more aggressive. Meanwhile, our competition is uncertain and more confused than ever. We use this situation to press forward. We seize the momentum in the battle. Our momentum carries us forward to win the competitive conflict.